

**CITY OF SAN MARCOS, TEXAS  
COMMUNITY SUMMIT AND VISIONING PROCESS**



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## **CITY OF SAN MARCOS, TEXAS**

### **Community Summit and Visioning Process**

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this effort is to facilitate a community summit and visioning process for the City of San Marcos, Texas. It combines input from citizens and the City Council to positively influence municipal government planning initiatives. This process result will culminate in the creation of a vision that will guide budget development and invigorate the City's capital improvement plan (CIP).

#### **Data Collection Methods**

A nonrandom selection process was used to obtain focus group participants. Although focus group participants were not randomly selected, they do collectively comprise a representative sample (i.e., one that has many of the important elements of the community).

Community residents were invited through City of San Marcos overtures to participate in one of seven (7) visioning focus groups. These were conducted between January 28 and February 5, 2008. Each session lasted approximately two hours and actively engaged participants in a visioning process. Participants were arranged into 4-5 subgroups within each session and provided input to the following questions:

- Describe how the City of San Marcos will look in 2014.
- What will it take to get the City of San Marcos to look how you describe it in the first query?
- What are the most important issues facing the City of San Marcos that the City (Municipal) Government needs to address over the next 5-6 years?
- Provide any final suggestions or recommendations for City Government officials.

Information from the focus groups was assembled and analyzed by the consultants.

#### **Analysis of Findings**

##### **Sample Description**

Across all focus groups, 175 residents participated in the summit and visioning sessions (40 of the participants were high school and college students). Table 1 shows that 52 % of the participants were women and 48 % were men. The sessions were arranged around a diversity of themes and interests in the local community. Representatives from the volunteer and religious communities, the senior citizen community, educational organizations, business interests, and City employees participated in focus groups. Additionally, a session open to all citizens was conducted and a session was held for high school and college students. Taking all of the focus groups into account, participation was very diverse and provided an interesting San Marcos microcosm.

**Table 1. Summary of Focus Group Participation, February 2008.**

<b>Session</b>	<b>Representatives</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Total</b>
1	Volunteer and Religious Organizations	12	11	23
2	Senior Citizen Community	22	14	36
3	Educational Organizations	4	5	9
4	Economic and Business Organizations	11	5	16
5	City Employees	16	15	31
6	Open Session	11	9	20
7	Students (high school and college)	22	18	40
<b>ALL</b>		<b>52.6 % (92)</b>	<b>47.4 % (83)</b>	<b>100.0 (175)</b>

The analysis will be divided into two sections. The first is comprised of the six focus group sessions not involving students. The second looks at high school and college student responses, only. We decided to split the analysis to illustrate differences between current adult San Marcos residents and future adult residents.

### **Summary of Resident Sessions**

**Vision Creation.** The first task for focus group participants was to create a vision for the San Marcos. Each group was asked to describe San Marcos in 2014. Using the descriptions provided and the interactive discussions that followed in each focus group session, a collective vision is provided below.

*In 2014, San Marcos is economically vibrant with excellent employment opportunities for residents and the availability of affordable housing has improved. Collaboration efforts between the City of San Marcos, Hays County, Texas State University, and the San Marcos Independent School District are proactive and strong. There is a user-friendly transportation grid in place within the region, freight rail is in the process of being re-routed, and commuter rail links San Marcos with Austin and San Antonio. The downtown area has been revitalized with an emphasis on historical preservation. Smart growth flourishes with a balance between population growth and protection of the environment. As a result, residents enjoy green space, the San Marcos River, and a variety of outdoor activities.*

This represents a very strong vision and it incorporates most of the essential elements that were identified in the focus groups. It provides a strong, comprehensive vision from which strategic goals and initiatives can be developed.

**Initiatives Identification.** When queried about what steps should be taken by the City of San Marcos to achieve the vision mentioned in the previous section, 156 responses were received from participants in the focus groups. Most of these responses were generated in subgroups where individuals worked together in the identification process. After all of the focus groups were conducted, responses were then grouped into

24 different steps. Table 2 provides a summary and points out that participants felt targeting economic development and protecting the environment were the two most important steps the City of San Marcos must take to achieve the vision. These are followed closely by continuing the collaboration efforts between the City of San Marcos and other key entities in the region, developing transportation alternatives, and improving code enforcement.

It should be noted that many of the steps identified by focus group participants are interrelated. By implementing some of these steps through initiatives will indirectly, as well as directly, impact other steps identified in the community visioning process.

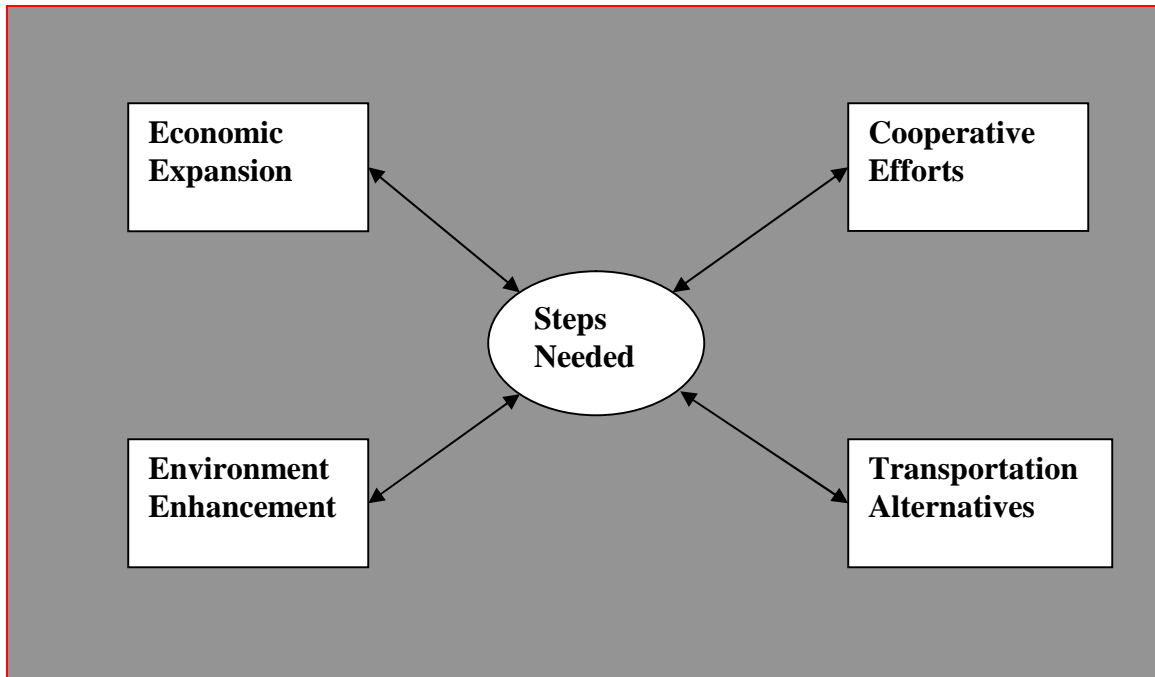
**Table 2. What Steps Should Be Taken by the City of San Marcos, Texas to Achieve the Collective Vision for 2014, February 2008.**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Target economic development	18	11.5
Protect the environment	14	9.0
Continuing collaboration between City, County, University, and School District	11	7.1
Develop transportation alternatives and improvements	11	7.1
Improve zoning and code enforcement	10	6.4
Strategic planning for population growth	9	5.8
Promote sense of community and improve image of San Marcos	9	5.8
Give citizens a greater voice in government	8	5.1
Issues related to railroad traffic and surface traffic patterns	7	4.5
Complete master plan	7	4.5
Provide incentives for small businesses	7	4.5
Prioritize expenditures of money	5	3.2
More support of lower income population	5	3.2
Improve City's physical infrastructure	5	3.2
Encourage improvement in San Marcos Independent School District	5	3.2
Reorganization of city volunteer opportunities	4	2.6
Improve professionalism of the City staff	4	2.6
Visioning ideas given to boards and commissions to create recommendations for the City Council	3	1.9
Capitalize on tourism and preserve natural beauty	3	1.9
Hire professional grant writer	3	1.9
Improve community activities	3	1.9
Housing development and hire a housing director	2	1.3
Prioritize the capital improvement plan based on real needs	2	1.3
Encourage the development of a community college district	1	0.5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The steps for achieving the vision can be grouped into four thematic areas (see Figure 1). Major initiative or steps should focus on economic expansion, cooperative efforts, environment enhancement, and transportation alternatives.

Economic expansion theme involves generating new opportunities for both small and large businesses. This includes creating job opportunities for well-paying positions that add tax and other revenue streams to the city and region. Economic expansion will need a larger and more educated workforce. Therefore, the school district and Texas State University must be involved in any economic development initiatives.

The cooperative efforts theme focuses on the key stakeholder organizations in the region. The City of San Marcos will have a lead role in creating and maintaining collaborative approaches regarding issues facing the region. For instance, municipal government is not directly responsible for economic development and improving educational achievement. However, it has a crucial role in getting all of the players together to implement ways to address issues related to these areas.



**Figure 1. Initiative Themes the City of San Marcos Should Take to Achieve the Vision, February 2008.**

The environment enhancement theme suggests that the City of San Marcos should protect and preserve the environment through smart growth. This requires steps aimed at balancing growth and green space. Often these are accomplished through planning areas of mixed use involving businesses, residential areas, recreational areas, and the preservation of natural surroundings.

The final theme addresses transportation alternatives. To alleviate transportation gridlock at peak times of the day along with freight rail traffic, alternative measures should be entertained. With respect to surface traffic, new roads and improvement of existing thoroughfares are necessary. The possibility of building an urban loop is a

consideration. Above grade crossings (overpasses) for key arteries would assist in reducing congestion exacerbated by rail traffic.

**Most Important Issues.** Focus group participants were asked to identify the most important issues facing the San Marcos over the next 5-6 years. They identified 31 distinct but interrelated issues or problems and these are provided in Table 3. The five that were mentioned most often were the need for a comprehensive transportation plan, economic development and diversification, better educational opportunities, smart population growth, and affordable housing. All of these, if addressed in a positive manner, directly impact the issue of an improved city image.

**Table 3. Most Important Issues and Problems Facing the City of San Marcos That Should Be Addressed Over the Next Five Years, February 2008.**

Item	Number	Percentage
Need for a comprehensive transportation plan	22	17.7
Economic development and diversification	11	8.8
Improving schools and educational opportunities	10	8.1
Smart growth	9	7.3
Affordable housing and communities	7	5.6
City image and tourism	6	4.8
Water sources for the future	6	4.8
Job creation	5	4.1
Building code enforcement and zoning	5	4.1
Environmental protection of parks and river	5	4.1
Improved communication between City and residents	4	3.3
Improve the infrastructure	4	3.3
Collaboration between governmental entities	3	2.4
Downtown development	3	2.4
Population growth	2	1.6
Develop leadership training for lower income families	2	1.6
Need strong leadership with a unified vision	2	1.6
Need for quality health care	2	1.6
Housing needs for senior citizens	2	1.6
Historic preservation	2	1.6
Competitive salaries/retention plan for City employees	2	1.6
Other issues that mentioned only once (ten items)*	10	8.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## Student Session Summary

Unlike the other focus group visions for San Marcos in 2014 which focused on positive aspects, students saw both the positive and negative images of San Marcos. Their comments regarding how the city will look in 2014 are annotated below.

- Beginning to look like San Antonio and Austin
- Continuous business from the North and South sides of San Marcos
- Transportation route between San Antonio and Austin other than I35
- Another major highway running through
- Taller and larger buildings
- Less mom and pop stores and more franchises
- More fast food joints
- Texas State has expanded
- More corporations while still having citizen owned businesses
- Support of small businesses located downtown by the City
- More residential areas which would increase traffic congestion
- More single story homes
- More businesses to the East and West of IH-35
- Accommodations for bikers and walkers within downtown
- Accommodations for tourists
- More attractions to bring tourists and their money to San Marcos
- A more teen friendly environment which includes entertainment especially for high school students
- Increase in teen pregnancy rate
- A healthier environment
- More businesses located around the river while preserving it at the same time
- Strip malls
- Expansion of playscape area with newer and modern equipment
- River will be more polluted
- Parks (natural areas) with hiking, walking, and biking trails
- More liquor stores
- Smoother and safer McCarty lane
- Community based activities especially for the older and younger citizens

A question was asked of the student focus group that was not asked in the other groups. The question was added because of their vision of San Marcos having more businesses. We wanted to know what types of businesses they would like to see in San Marcos in 2014. Their answers are annotated below.

- Entertainment businesses such as movie theaters, amusement sites, and river outlets in order to take advantage of this resource.
- Equipment outlets to supply hikers and bikers their goods
- Music venues such as chain stores but also where patrons could receive lessons and equipment
- Corporate head quarters to support college graduates

After the discussion involving how San Marcos will look in 2014, students were asked to identify initiatives that would allow San Marcos to look like the vision that they described. Their answers are annotated below.

- Improve the infrastructure while preserving the natural beauty of the area
- Create historical landmarks
- Attract more businesses along the interstate to generate economic growth and increase the tax base
- Add bike paths along roads
- Have flexibility in planning and zoning to accommodate increased growth
- Regulation of location of new businesses especially around the schools
- Keep small businesses going; do not allow big corporations to locate next to them
- Initiate a Smart Growth plan
- Improve synchronization of traffic lights
- Have a stronger relationship with Texas State
- Have citizens work on projects with the City in order to create a sense of community
- Need to retain sense of identity especially when corporations move in

Students were asked to identify the major issues or problems that are facing San Marcos and need to be rectified in order to move San Marcos towards their vision. Their comments are listed below:

- Address the high drop out rate of high school students
- Teen pregnancy
- Get people to want to live in San Marcos instead of commuting in to work
- Train tracks going through the center of town
- Take a proactive role in the PR of SMISD
- Be prepared for growth
- Correct communication line between high school and Texas State
- Stronger police force
- Better construction plan
- Educate youth about drug, alcohol, pregnancies, and life skills
- Need better paying jobs so people will stay and help lower the poverty level

The last question that was posed to the students was whether or not they would stay in San Marcos after they graduated. We then asked why they would leave or what made them stay. Their reasons for staying or leaving are annotated below.

A. Reasons to Stay San Marcos.

- Love the heart and soul
- The river is my sanctuary
- San Marcos is the perfect size
- I grew up here and feel very comfortable



#### B. Reasons to Leave San Marcos.

- Have to go to a bigger city for the better jobs
- Not much to do
- Lack of diversity
- Need more options all around
- Does not offer options in terms of career choice
- No high paying jobs
- Not enough jobs

#### **Recommendations**

Based on the discussions generated in the focus group sessions, three recommendations are provided for consideration.

**Strategic Plan Development.** The City of San Marcos should create a comprehensive strategic plan that integrates the various planning efforts currently in progress. The City Council should identify 4-5 broad strategic goal thematic areas to guide this development process.

**Improve Communication Efforts.** The City of San Marcos should review its communications and public relations strategies utilized to disseminate information. More needs to be done to ensure that citizens and residents know about City initiatives and successes. Use of a variety of media outlets should be explored.

**Establish A Visioning Taskforce.** A blue ribbon advisory committee aimed at creating a set of recommendations for shaping the future of San Marcos should be commissioned. It should provide a vision and broad recommendations for a San Marcos in 2028. This taskforce membership composition should be diverse and reflective of the region.